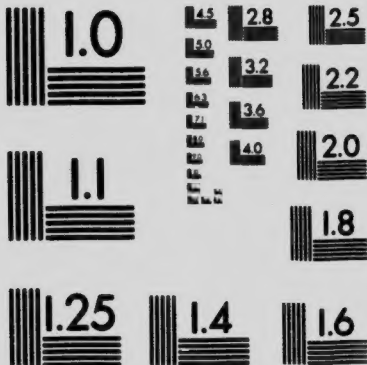




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SIR JOHN MACDONALD
ON
IMPERIAL FEDERATION,

By S. B. BOULTON.

A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE.

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presented by the Author to the Fifth Congress of Chambers of
Commerce of the Empire meeting at Montreal, August, 1903.*

IN the autumn of 1881, accompanied by my eldest son, I took a journey through part of the United States and Canada. Upon visiting Ottawa, I made the acquaintance of Sir John Macdonald, through the introduction of one of his personal friends and political supporters. The interview which then took place made so strong an impression upon my mind that I took copious notes of our conversation. Upon recent reference to my diary, I was much struck with the remarkable clearness of foresight and vigour of expression with which my distinguished interlocutor described and foretold ten years ago the difficulties which at present impede the progress of that Imperial Federation which he strongly desired. I have therefore felt it a duty to place the principal points of our conversation upon record.

Ten years ago Ottawa itself, the youngest of all the capitals of civilised empire, appeared to me as a city built in the wilderness, slowly struggling into a position of importance, and owing what it possessed of grace and dignity to the group of buildings picturesquely situated on a high rocky eminence which dominated the town. These were the newly built Houses of Parliament, the symbol and embodiment of that new and vigorous idea of Federation which had created the Dominion of Canada out of a number of sparsely inhabited settlements

scattered over the immense territories extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific; the idea of Imperial unity being suggested by the fact that the site of the capital itself was chosen by her Majesty the Queen. 'Practical men' had at first scouted the idea of Canadian Federation as altogether visionary; the energy of Sir John Macdonald had mainly contributed to the realisation of the vision as a practical reality. But as a practical reality it could hardly have endured and solidified without the realisation of that other 'visionary project,' the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, to which the Canadian Premier was also devoting his incomparable energies at the time of my visit.

On arriving at the pretty and unpretentious villa in the suburbs of Ottawa in which the Premier resided during the session of the Dominion Parliament, I was welcomed by Sir John with a genial smile and a cordial grasp of the hand. I at once noticed the resemblance to the Englishman which has been so often remarked; but the resemblance was a difference. The resemblance was an outward countenance only; the figure was that of a fine-looking man, tall, erect, and well preserved (I quote from my notes); the hair turning grey, the look keen and animated. He at once placed himself at my disposal for any information which might be of service to me, and as the conversation warmed he volunteered many details of a most interesting character.

The first topic which engaged us was that of the Canadian Pacific Railway then in course of construction, and, calling to his secretary to bring in a number of plans and maps, he entered with much animation into a description of the various routes which had been discussed and decided upon. Starting from Ottawa in a W.N.W. direction, the line was to tap Nepigon Bay on Lake Superior (which he at that time considered would turn out to be a better port than Thunder Bay), and thence it was to proceed to Winnipeg. He also pointed out the alternative routes from Winnipeg to the Rocky Mountains, and from the Rockies to the Pacific (some points in which routes were still under discussion), giving his reasons for preferring one to the other, from advantages in point of cost, or as tapping various sources of natural wealth, or as passing through regions abounding in lumber, which would supply the timber deficiencies of parts of Manitoba. And, as he spoke of the future prospects of the great North-West Territory, of its capabilities and resources, agricultural and metallurgical, and of its destiny as the home of a great and flourishing population, his face glowed and his eye fired with the enthusiasm of a prophet of old. I am told that such moods, or at all events their outer manifestations, were with him exceedingly rare. I

can conceive it to have been the outpouring of a mind worn with a struggle of which the success was then apparently within grasp, and of which, owing to my expressions of sympathy, I became the accidental recipient. For he regarded the great railway, not only from the point of view of enhancing the material prosperity of the Dominion, but as the necessary agent for consolidating that Dominion itself; and not only so, but, as he expressed it, as a means for promoting the unity and security of the British Empire.

From a description of the Canadian Pacific Railway he proceeded to give an account of the manner in which the Hudson's Bay Territory had passed under the control of the Dominion; of the first formation of the Hudson's Bay Company, and of its struggle with a company of French origin, the North-West Company, until the two had finally amalgamated.

The joint company had gradually spread its authority from Prince Rupert's Land, its first acquisition, over the whole of the western part of what is now the Dominion, and all such territorial rights as the company possessed had been finally purchased by the Dominion for a lump sum, and a title in fee-simple for certain limited portions of land. Upon my asking him how far northward he considered the territories of the Dominion to extend, he replied with a smile, 'Right up to the North Pole, and inclusive of the North Pole.'

I was then, as now, an ardent sympathiser with the cause of Imperial Federation, and, emboldened by his kindness, I ventured to ask for his opinion on that important topic. Upon my putting it to him whether he thought that the idea could ever be more than a poet's dream, he at once said that he believed in the possibility of its becoming a practical reality, and so far as Canada was concerned he expressed the strong desire that her union with the mother country might be continued and drawn closer. I asked him whether he thought that some form of Imperial Zollverein might not be extremely desirable in itself, and whether it might not perhaps prove to be the first step towards the desired federation, as had been the case with the recently reconstructed German Empire. He said yes, but there were difficulties in the way, and that any measure which might be proposed for this closer commercial union must be considered not merely from the point of view of the old country, but also with due regard to the circumstances and feelings of young and sparsely populated colonies. As regarded Canada, he pointed to the fact that in the past her manufacturing industries had been crushed by the importation of the surplus commodities of the United States, and that they had also been subjected to the manoeuvres of syndicates, corners, and other manipulations on the part of their neighbours across the border,

whereas they were at present flourishing under the provisions of the actual tariff. The conversation then turned upon the possibility of some system either of free trade or of low tariff being established as between the various sections of a federated empire, for all products grown or manufactured in any part thereof, leaving to each section of the empire the liberty of making any tariff arrangements it pleased as against any foreign countries. Sir John thought that some form of customs union might be devised, and he stated that already in its tariffs Canada had shown its desire to favour the products of the mother country by placing lighter duties upon such classes of goods as came principally from Great Britain. But he explained that for Canada import duties were a matter of necessity, even as regarded revenue. Like all young communities, Canada disliked direct taxation, and whatever could be raised by direct taxes had a heavy first charge upon it for the expenses of the various provincial governments, so that few sources of revenue were left for the Central Government of the Dominion except the customs and excise duties. And in the present stage of its existence the expenditure for public works of actual necessity for knitting together and developing the immense territories of the Dominion was exceedingly heavy in proportion to the population.

Again, the boundary of the Dominion was conterminous with that of the United States throughout the whole length of its territory. So long as the United States elected to raise its revenue more by customs duties than by direct taxation, the action of Canada would be influenced in the same direction. For settlers would be inclined to select the southern side of the border rather than the northern, if they found the direct taxation cheaper on the United States side than on the Canadian. Sir John also alluded to the point that a very small duty on the importation of foreign grain into England, whilst admitting colonial grain free, would be of immense importance to the agricultural interests of Canada.

Throughout the whole of the conversation Sir John showed himself to be a sincere and consistent believer in Imperial Federation; never losing sight, however, of the many difficulties which would have to be overcome in the attainment of the desired consummation. As regarded the military and naval considerations involved in a system of federation, he fully appreciated the great advantages of mutual and organised defence, and he believed that under a well-considered arrangement the colonies would be willing to contribute towards the expenses incurred for joint protection. He alluded with some feeling to the manner in which colonial aspirations and advice had at times been unnecessarily 'snubbed' by certain

administrations in the old country. And by a subsequent conversation with one of his colleagues in the Government, I was induced to suppose that the allusion may have had some reference to the fact that the Canadian Government had desired the retention of at least a couple of regiments of British troops as a symbol of united empire, and as a garrison for Quebec, the strongest *place d'armes* on the American continent. But although the Dominion had been willing to bear the whole expense, the request had been refused by the Home Government, and the troops finally removed.

Upon my speaking to Sir John of the objections which are so commonly raised against any scheme of federation, on account of the distance between the mother country and her colonies, he replied with animation: 'Do you speak of the ocean which unites us? I have the honour,' he continued, 'of sitting in the Dominion Parliament as member for Victoria, Vancouver's Island. I am kindly taken upon trust by my constituents, for owing to the length of the journey I have never once been able to visit them, but I find it necessary in the interests of the Dominion to visit London almost every year.' We then spoke of the ocean as being the great connecting link between the different parts of the Empire; as the best of military roads, because we had, or could and ought to have, undisputed command of it; and as the cheapest and best of commercial routes, over which, as the great carriers of the world, our mercantile marine possessed undoubted supremacy.

So ended my conversation with the most remarkable statesman and patriot that constitutional government in our colonies has yet produced. During the ten years that have since elapsed, his public action has been entirely consistent with the ideas which he so warmly expounded in 1881. The last political struggle in which he was engaged ended in a victory over opponents who were proposing measures which were calculated, in his opinion, to weaken and eventually to destroy the connection between Canada and the Empire. We are now deploring his death, but surely 'he being dead yet speaketh.' For those who earnestly desire the unity of the Empire, it is encouraging to reflect that Sir John Macdonald, who achieved Canadian federation in spite of the croaking of the 'highest and most respectable authorities,' was also a staunch and steadfast believer in the future success of Imperial federation. Surely the opinion of one such man outweighs the utterances of a whole host of croakers! The unification of Italy and the formation of the German Empire were both pronounced to be absolutely impossible until the events belied the prophecies. It is true, however, that the Cavour or the Bismarck of British Imperial federation is yet to be found, or to announce himself!

There are two germ ideas, from either of which the actual organism of Imperial federation may proceed; they are, respectively, commercial union and military union. A conference for the consideration of subjects of mutual interest concerning the great self-governing colonies and the mother country was held in London in the year 1887. No well-wisher to the interests of our race can doubt that great and abiding good has resulted from this first attempt at the convocation of an Imperial deliberative assembly. If the question of closer commercial union was only tentatively discussed, the principle of co-operation between the colonies and the mother country for mutual naval and military defence was certainly advanced more than one stage by the arrangements decided upon at this conference. Not the least important of the proceedings of the conference was the initiation of the principle of consulting an assembly of representatives of the colonies upon matters of an international character which affected colonial interests. This was actually done at five of the sittings reported as confidential.* On the other important questions which were discussed at this conference, I will not now enter.

The Imperial Federation League is now seeking to bring about another conference of a similar character, but with the object, if possible, of learning the views of the colonies as to some scheme of federation. The London Chamber of Commerce has appointed a committee for the purpose of eliciting information and promoting discussion as to the possibilities of a closer commercial union between Great Britain and her colonies, and this subject will also be brought forward for discussion at a conference of the chambers of commerce of the Empire to be held in London next year, and for which the London chamber has forwarded invitations. Undoubtedly the crux in this problem consists in the divergence in thought and practice between the mother country and the colonies as regards free trade and protection, and the question, to be successfully treated, must be approached in no mere doctrinaire spirit. Commercial relations between the old country and the colonies are becoming of more and more importance as compared with foreign trade, and free trader as I am I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that in one respect the protectionist United States has outstripped free trade England. For the United States has at least established perfect free trade between all portions of her own vast territory.

Without venturing in these pages to prophesy as to the form which the federation of the British Empire may take if it be

* For a very able report by the Rev. Canon Dalton upon this Conference, I would refer to vol. xix. of the *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*.

ever accomplished, I may remark that in most cases where kindred tribes have formed themselves into a nation, the idea of mutual protection for military defence has been the prevailing motive. It may be assumed, and in fact it is already beginning to be realised, that the great colonies if they are to remain united to us will be able and willing to contribute in varying proportions towards the expenses of a system of common defence, naval and military. In this event, the contributing sections of the Empire must necessarily have some voice in the expenditure of the funds so contributed. They will have to send representatives to some central consultative body, whatever it may be called. Such a body might contain within itself the germ of the future representative assembly, the truly Imperial Parliament. To this assembly may be relegated such functions for the good of all sections of the Empire as the separate sections may from time to time deem it advisable to entrust to it without in any way interfering with the individual self-government of the various colonies and of the mother country itself.

Should not the achievements and opinions of such a man as the statesman who has departed from us incite us to eschew in regard to the politics of the Empire the 'craven fear of being great?' If it may not be given to us to realise that grand idea, the confederation of *all* the nations which have sprung from the race nurtured in these isles, should we not at least use all our energies to promote the union and political consolidation of that Greater Britain which still owns one flag and acknowledges one sovereign? So that, closely joined together for the purposes of mutual defence, and connected to our mutual advantage by all the ties of growing commercial intercourse, we may be so strong in our unity that none would venture to attack us, so peaceful in our aspirations that we should neither attempt nor desire to be aggressive towards other nations.

S. B. BOULTON.

POSTSCRIPT.

Since the foregoing article has been in type some weighty words have been uttered by Lord Salisbury in reply to the deputation from the Imperial Federation League which waited upon him at the Foreign Office on the 17th of June. His Lordship's emphatic declaration that the subject was 'of profound importance,' involving 'neither more nor less than the future of the British Empire,' and his indication that the time was come for some definite scheme of Federation to be formulated, furnish evidence that the question is approaching the range of practical politics. His definition of the two bases upon which a confederation should be established—the Zollverein and the Kriegsverein—is clear and precise, and whilst the Zollverein would be of incalculable benefit to the Empire, the Kriegsverein appears to be absolutely essential to the maintenance of its integrity.—S. B. B.